

THE RED PENCIL

Cindy Vallar analyzes the work behind published manuscripts. In this issue, she profiles Pip Ballantine and Tee Morris's *Dawn's Early Light*.

Ask for a definition of “steampunk,” and you’ll get just as many answers as the number of people that you queried. The genre didn’t particularly appeal to me until earlier this year when my short story, “Rumble the Dragon,” was released. Another story in the anthology – “The Celeste Affair” by D. Alan Lewis – hooked me, and since then I’ve read several other steampunk novels, including *Dawn's Early Light* by Pip Ballantine and Tee Morris.

So what constitutes steampunk? The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines it as “science fiction dealing with 19th-century societies dominated by historical or imagined steam-powered technology.” The time period and the historical inventions explain why HNS believes some steampunk falls under historical fiction. What do Tee and Pip think?

We’ve noted the debate about the growing popularity diluting the “punk” aspect of steampunk. An elite few have even been so bold to say “Oh, the ‘punk’ is just tacked on to sound cool. Steampunk is just Victorian science fiction.” This kind of black-and-white definition and deeming it an absolute can only be described as short-sighted and shallow. Steampunk may have started out as 19th-century science fiction, but is now far deeper than romantic Victoriana, goggles, and brass fixtures. The way Pip and I see it, the “punk” comes from going against convention, through creativity and a declaration of one’s individuality be it through style, gadgets, or attitude.

As far as being Historical Fiction, it is the fantastic reimagining of technology. The science that makes steampunk gadgetry work is based on ideas of the time, but the storytelling means we suspend laws of engineering for a time.

Technology – dirigibles, electricity, automobiles, and death rays – plays an important role in *Dawn's Early Light*,

but some of the characters include Queen Victoria, Prince Albert, Thomas Edison, and Nikola Tesla. The story takes place three decades after the Civil War, when British agents Eliza Braun and Wellington Books are sent to the United States to work with their American counterparts, Wild Bill Wheatley and Felicity Lovelace. Their assignment? Find out who’s behind recent nautical and aerial disasters off the North Carolina coast.

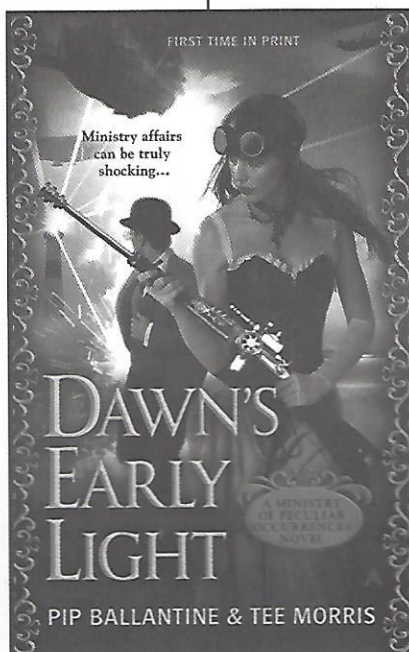
As with any novel, setting is crucial. Its portrayal helps transport us to an earlier place and time. In the early draft of chapter 5, Eliza and Bill seek clues to the mysterious accidents at Quagmire’s, a local bar.

The establishment smelt of fish, sea salt, and unwashed men, and was not the first place she would have picked as a night out on the town with a handsome foreign agent. Not that she was going to tell Bill she thought he was handsome. She couldn’t imagine how large his arrogance would get if she let that one slip.

A little building on the sand, with the wind whistling and rattling the windows, a handful of bleak looking locals, was not nearly as comfortable as Sounds’ Retreat – but it was considerably less full of annoying nouveau riche. Quagmire’s was not as heaving as the pub she’d grown up in back in New Zealand, but it was closer to it than where they had left Wellington and Felicity. As far as she was concerned, she and Bill had the better deal. . . .

They had both dressed down for this little bit of infiltration, but the resident population of the Outer Banks was so small, that they were always going to draw notice. Apart from the rich little country resort, the rest of these giant sandbank’s inhabitants were better described as “salt of the earth.” Or perhaps, of the Earth and Sea, Eliza mused.

In working on the revisions, Pip and Tee “wanted to lay the groundwork that Eliza is not entirely happy to be leaving her work partner (who she is definitely attracted to) in the company of a pretty young librarian lady. Though Eliza likes a good bar brawl as much as the next secret agent, she would rather be with Wellington. There was also the comparison of a seedy sailor’s bar to the rather posh Swan’s Retreat.” (The retreat is the resort where the four agents are staying. It’s a



better comparison for the reader than the pub from Eliza's past.) The reworded description of Quagmire's demonstrates that "while Eliza notices it is a rather worn, dangerous place, she would rather be there than hanging out with rich folk." Their changes improved the story's flow, and we can better picture the setting.

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Quagmire's – the territory they were currently scoping – was a little building on the sand, with windows easily rattled by the whistling wind and a handful of bleak-looking locals enjoying a limited choice of spirits. A far cry from Swan's Retreat. . . .

Eliza raised both her eyebrows and sighed. They had both dressed down for this little bit of infiltration; but the resident population of the Outer Banks was so small, they would have drawn notice no matter what they wore. Apart from the rich little country resort, the rest of these giant sandbank's inhabitants were better described as "salt of the earth." Or perhaps, of the earth and sea, Eliza mused.

Characters can also enrich the setting. "Local watering holes also are good places to catch up on the gossip of the area, and make friends with a few pints," which is why the agents come to Quagmire's. Merle is one of the bar's regulars, but in the early draft he's simply an "Oracle" character, who "became a plothole."

The little group of locals shared a few glances. "You need to talk to Merl," one of them whispered. "He's seen things."

They pointed to an even older man, huddled in the corner, nursing a glass of whiskey, and avoiding everyone's gaze. Using her keen observational skills, Eliza soon noted that under his trousers he was missing a leg. The prosthetic was nothing like the one her maid back in London Alice owned. This looked a much cruder and older designed. A quick glance at the fixtures told her that it had not been well cared for, and was pitted and scarred by a life at sea. Much like the man who it was strapped to.

Will leaned over. "War veteran," he muttered, and the tone in his voice reminded Eliza that the scars of

the Civil War were still very fresh here. It had been just over thirty years since it ground to a halt, mired in machinery and blood in the fields of Virginia. The North had won, but at a terrible price. . . .

She noted the way he huddled in the corner, but still managed to have a good line of sight on the door and the rest of the drinkers in the establishment. He had the look of a beaten, but still angry dog. His hand slid down his good leg, and she was sure that he had some kind of pistol there. Her hands were full of glasses and the bottle, but she would drop them in a moment and pull on him if need be. She'd rely on the speed of youth to beat him.

After a moment of examining her, his hand slid away from whatever he had stashed in his coat. A smile twitched in the corner of his mouth, and eyes as grey as the ocean raked her form up and down. "What do you want girl?"

In the early draft another character imparts key information to the agents rather than Merle. In the final version, Merle becomes more important and is portrayed in a better light. Why? "[T]he blonde . . . seemed to appear from nowhere, and then [disappear] . . . more like a placeholder than a character. . . . [D]uring the editing . . . we had to ask . . . 'why do we have the conversation with Merle, but this blonde guy comes from out of nowhere and drops the bomb of information? Why talk to Merle then?'" So Pip and Tee took advantage of North Carolina's rich history to add depth to the character. "The Civil War had a huge impact not just on the nation, but also on its people. . . . We took advantage of that history . . . to make Merle something more than just 'an old grizzled sailor' seen as a trope in adventures like this. By making him not only a Civil War veteran but a hero, we give him a past and we make him more real."

. . . "I've been pepperin' the talk with questions about anything that just wasn't right. I kept hearin' the same thing: talk to Merle. Accordin' to the lore, he's seen things." [Bill] took a swig of his beer.

Eliza looked at her partner, and shrugged. "Merle is . . . ?"

He pointed to an older man huddled in the corner, nursing a glass of whiskey, avoiding everyone's gaze. Eliza noticed immediately that there was something strange about the man's legs. With a little more observation she discerned a prosthetic, just visible through long tears in the fabric. The fixtures she could only just see did not look well cared for, pitted and scarred by a life at sea. Much like the man it was

strapped to.

Bill leaned over. "Veteran," he muttered. "Surprised the old codger has lived this long."

He's a man, Bill. Not some horse that should be put down on account of a crippling wound."

He took another swig of his beer. "Take a good look at ol' Merle, and tell me that what he's got is something resembling a life." . . .

He had the look of a beaten, but still very angry dog. The pity Eliza felt welling inside her vanished when Merle locked eyes with her as she approached. His hand slid down his good leg. The snarl growing on his face, and her own instincts warned her of some kind of pistol there. Her own hands were full, but she could drop the glasses and bottle in a moment to pit her speed of youth against his advanced years and experience.

Not tonight, she thought as she cast a warm smile his way.

After a moment, his hand slid back into view, his eyes, grey as the ocean, still fixed with hers. A smile twitched in the corner of his mouth as he raked her form up and down. "What do you want, girl?"

This simple introduction permitted Pip and Tee to build on Merle's character until he matters "not only to the plot but to the reader."

Historical elements can also affect setting. The published version of this novel includes a reference to the Golden Age of Piracy.

[Merle] leaned forward over the table and gestured her in closer. "It's real, you know? Blackbeard's airship, Devil's Shadow, went down here. He was en route to Ocracoke, but had to stop at Corolla for a quick refuel. There was a ship moored offshore. He thought it was Queen Anne's Revenge, but it wasn't." He exchanged his now empty glass for Eliza's. "Not sure who it was that done it, but Blackbeard's airship fell from the sky that night. A ball of flame that lit the Currituck Banks for miles."

While akin to a fantastic yarn to chill children in front of a hearth's fire, Merle's story actually had merit. Early airships in the nineteenth century were truly experimental, usually a long gondola with several balloons suspended overhead.

Pirate vessels were particularly dangerous as the easiest lighter-than-air gas to purchase through underground channels was hydrogen, hence why

airships were not so common in the Golden Age of Piracy.

Blackbeard, a real pirate with a real ship named *Queen Anne's Revenge*, frequented the waters around Ocracoke, where he also met his demise in 1718, during the Golden Age of Piracy, rather than a century later. Some readers might not notice this historical error, but being a pirate historian, I did. Tee also knew this, but the error was intentional rather than accidental.

Our changes in "the Past that Never Was" actually come from true history. Airships were an idea dating back to 1670. In 1785 Jean-Pierre Blanchard crossed the English Channel in a balloon equipped with flapping wings for propulsion and a birdlike tail for steering, but in our Steampunk world, technology is shifted forward, meaning many technological marvels and accomplishments would have occurred earlier. This is why Blackbeard took to the skies and why the Golden Age of Piracy happened a hundred years before history records it so. Whenever you change technology, writers should consider how many years they want to shift accomplishments . . .

While Pip and Tee include story elements found in science fiction and fantasy, their treatment of the historical elements never strains our ability to believe in the world they create. Their three-dimensional portrayals of real people demonstrate the depth of their research into these people's lives. If you're thinking about stepping into the world of steampunk, *Dawn's Early Light* is well worth the adventure, but once you open that door, you may find yourself craving more. ❖



CINDY VALLAR is a columnist, freelance editor, historical novelist, and workshop presenter. Dark Oak Press recently released her historical fantasy, "Rumble the Dragon," in their short story anthology, *A Tall Ship, A Star, and Plunder*. You can visit her at www.cindyvallar.com.